

Priority X

By George R. Strayton; Illustrations by Chris Trevas

She wasn't out of hyperspace for more than a few minutes when the incoming-message indicator buzzed. She took in a steady breath -- her body was still recovering from her narrow escape of Ulicia just a half hour earlier -- and then hit the comm display:

MESSAGE FOR: Hart-and-Parn Gorra-Fiolla of Lorrd
SECTION: Office of the Auditor-General

FROM: Akeeli Somerce, First Assistant to the Prex
SECTION: Office of the Prex, Chils Meplin
REGARDING: New Assignment
PRIORITY: X/Class A Infraction

The use of her full name immediately set her off, but the source and priority of the message had grabbed her attention, relegating the peeve to the back of her mind.

"Priority X?" she found herself saying out loud. *From the Office of the Prex?* Something about the header itself unsettled her-made her outright anxious, in fact.

She delved into the body of the message. It took her a few moments to read to the end, at which point she could do nothing but stare at the screen, hoping she was hallucinating. According to the Prex's informants, the Rebels had just destroyed the Empire's Death Star battle station near the Yavin star system. And because the Corporate Sector Authority had an Imperial charter, anything that affected the Empire affected the CSA, as well.

The message indicated that one rumor placed the fleeing band of insurgents in the Abo Dreth system, which was within Corporate Sector borders. The Prex wanted her to verify that information -- immediately.

Normally, she didn't need much time to prepare for an assignment. But in this case she was low on fuel, almost out of power cells for her blaster and still in possession of the prisoner she'd just "liberated" from Commex's headquarters. She couldn't just turn around now and head off on another case...

Except for the fact that the assignment came from the Office of the Prex and was classified Priority X, which essentially left her no choice. Without further debate, she punched the designated coordinates for Abo Dreth into the navicomputer and then left the astrogation software to calculate the precise vectors as she headed aft to take care of her prisoner, who was currently bound to one of the ship's bulkheads.



Naven Crel looked up as she entered the passenger area. "Priority X, huh? Sounds important."

"Give me a break, Crel. You don't even know what that means."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Don't you have other things to worry about? Industrial sabotage is a Class B infraction, you know. If the Prex hadn't ordered me to get you out of there, Commex would've ended your life without a second thought. In a few days you'll be on trial before the entire Direx board -- maybe you should start coming up with a plan."

She gave his binders a hard yank, eliciting a yelp from Crel. "That should hold you for a while." She returned to the cockpit, ignoring the curses Crel was muttering under his breath. A light on the control board indicated that the navicomputer had completed the hyperspace calculations. She strapped herself into the flight chair and pulled the three lightspeed levers backward. With a slight jolt, the *Tydia Rish* leaped into hyperspace.

She checked the ship's status indicators. All normal. According to the navicomputer, the trip would take less than 45 minutes -- enough time to catch a quick nap. Although she hated being asleep at the helm, she'd been up for 30 hours already, so even a short rest would do wonders --she hoped.

As she succumbed to her exhaustion, one last thought wound its way through her mind: *Besides, what could possibly go wrong?*

She awoke with a start. Before she could even focus, she felt something cold pressed against the side of her neck.

"How *this* for a plan?" Crel said, dropping into a hearty laugh that defied his slim stature.

Fiolla straightened up in her chair as she regained her bearings. Crel stood to her right, his finger on the blaster trigger -- *her* blaster, she realized. She looked up, straight into his eyes. "You're not serious?"

"Pretty serious. And what're you going to do about it?"

As she slid down in her seat, she said, "This," and then kicked the lightspeed levers forward, immediately dropping the ship back into realspace. As he glanced over to see what she had just done, she grabbed the throttle and initiated the reverse thrusters.

Crel's inertia slammed him into the control board, and the blaster flew from his hand. A half second later, Fiolla unclicked her seat restraints, jumped up and just as Crel turned back around -- punched him solidly on the chin. He fell to the deckplates in a heap.

"I like my plan better," she said, flexing her bruised hand so it wouldn't stiffen as the muscles repaired themselves.

Fifteen minutes later she had him bound again -- this time wrists *and* ankles -- and strapped into the seat next to hers. The chronometer counted down the last few seconds to her destination, and then the *Tydia Rish* decelerated into realspace.

Fiolla looked out the viewport onto Abo Dreth -- a large, dark brown world dotted with hundreds of silver lakes. The thin lines of rivers wandered across the planet's face in no particular pattern, and a few gray cloud banks drifted across the equatorial region. The automatic sensors showed meager life signs, higher than normal levels of radioactivity and a nitrogen-heavy atmosphere. "Perfect place for a hideout, I guess."

She set the sensors to scan mode, searching for any humanoid life forms. Less than a minute later, she had something -- a blip on the western edge of the smallest continent. She grabbed the control yoke and dove for the surface.

She pulled Crel up to the edge of a bluff. She couldn't leave him behind -- she hadn't even figured out how he'd escaped the first time. She checked his breath mask to make sure it was properly sealed and then returned to her surveillance.

She made one pass across the wide wasteland with her naked eye and then, finding nothing, gave the macrobinoculars a try.

Still nothing.

No... wait.

About three kilometers off sat an object that gleamed in the light of the system's yellow sun.

"It's a Corellian StarRunner," came a woman's voice from behind her.

Fiolla spun around, accidentally knocking Crel to the ground. The human woman before her wore standard spacer's clothing and a breath mask and had a sporting blaster trained on Fiolla.

"Who are you?" Fiolla asked.

The woman moved closer. "My ship... it's a Corellian StarRunner. Not even on the market yet."

Fiolla squinted against the harsh midday sunlight. The woman definitely looked familiar. "You planning using that thing?" she asked, eyeing the blaster.

"This?" she said in a lilting timbre. "Of course."

"All right, what do you want? I've got some supplies on my ship, a few credits, a couple of expended power cells. Any of that sound good to you?" Next to her, Crel finally struggled back to his feet.

"No," she said as she continued to move closer. "I'm not interested in any of that."

"Then what?"

She gave a smile that Fiolla didn't find at all endearing. "I'm here for you.

Time for a different tack. "Do you realize who I am?"

"Oh, most certainly... Fiolla of Lorr. In fact, I've been waiting for you. You're late."

"Yeah, well, I had some... passenger trouble."

The woman stopped a few meters from Fiolla and Crel, and leveled her blaster at Fiolla's chest.

Fiolla swallowed and glanced at her own blaster in the holster at her hip.

"Try it," the woman said. Fiolla knew better than to go for the blaster while her adversary was focused on it -- especially when her hand was still a bit stiff from punching Crel. She needed a distraction to give her that extra moment.

"I'm sure my boss will wish he'd been here to see this," the woman said. "But he's got more important matters to deal with."

"Who's your boss?"

"Haven't figured it out yet? I'm shocked. You just infiltrated one of his corporate headquarters not three hours ago."

"Commex? You work for Erdin Giblo?"

"Hardly. I report to the head of the super-corp that owns Commex."

Fiolla suddenly wondered how this woman could have even known about her last assignment. There were only two people who had access to that information -- the Prex himself, Chils Meplin, and his assistant. She looked into the woman's eyes. "Akeeli Somerce."

"Very good, my ex-Auditor-General. The Prex has decided that you and your friend here know too much."

"So the rumor about the Rebels?"

"Obviously fictitious." Somerce raised the blaster and took careful aim.

In the same moment, Fiolla felt something rub against her side. She glanced down to see Crel's *free* hand edging toward her blaster. Somehow he had managed to slip out of his binders as he was getting back to his feet.

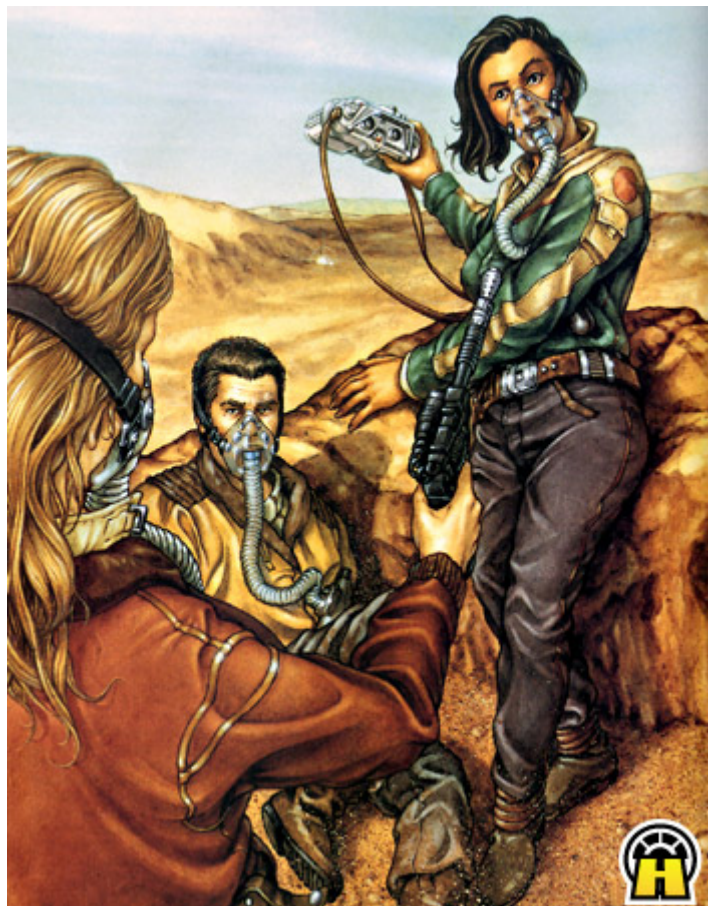
"Wait!" Fiolla said, stalling. "I don't understand. What does the Prex have to do with Commex leaking top-level CSA data to the Empire?"

Somerce stared into her eyes. "I don't think it's any of your business." She pulled the trigger...

And at the same time, Crel yanked the blaster from Fiolla's holster and fired.

Fiolla leaped to the side, hit the ground hard and then rolled, stopping just a meter away. She looked up to see Somerce lying face upward, not moving.

"Thanks, Crel," she said as she stood up. "I owe you one." When she didn't get an answer, she turned to see Crel sprawled across the dusty surface. She rushed



over to him and knelt at his side.

"Crel?" As she said his name, she noticed that an ID card had slipped halfway out of an until-now-concealed jacket pocket. She pulled it the rest of the way out and turned it over.

It was an Auditor-General's badge.

Finally the circumstances started to fall into place, forming a twisted plot of sabotage and treason -- and now attempted assassination. Naven Crel had gone undercover to ferret out a traitor against the CSA, and his investigation had lead him to Commex, which was in turn controlled by... the Prex, the second most powerful man in the Corporate Sector.

"Crel?" she said, shaking his shoulder.

His eyes opened -- barely -- and scanned her features as if trying to recognize her. "You were right," he said after a moment. "I was in over my head." As he spoke, his words grew quieter. "Just do me one favor..."

"Anything."

He swallowed with obvious difficulty. "Get... Meplin."

Fiolla watched as Crel exhaled his last breath, and then she put a hand on his chest. She glanced across the surface at Somerce's lifeless body. "Don't worry, my friend. Meplin's days of selling the CSA out to the Empire are over. I stake my life on it."